

Utilizing the Stages of Internship to Help Students Transition from Interns to Health Education Professionals

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Abstract

The health education internship may be a life changing experience that provides students with opportunities to move from the academic world to the professional world. To help students better understand the transition between these two worlds this article will describe the Stages of Internship developed by Sweitzer and King (1994, 1995, 1999) and how this organizational framework for stage management was adapted for use in an undergraduate health education internship program at West Chester University. The Stages of Internship focuses on five predictable stages students encounter during internships. These stages include: anticipation, disillusionment, confrontation, competence, and culmination. The Stages of Internship serves as a framework for identification of each stage as it relates to student development throughout the internship experience. It is important for faculty and internship supervisors to be able to develop strategies to manage each stage during the internship experience and provide students with appropriate guidelines for transitioning through the internship stages. Guidelines are presented on effective stage management strategies and practical knowledge needed to help students understand the stages of change. A greater understanding of the Stages of Internship enables health education professionals to help students build skills to transition successfully from one stage to another therefore providing a strong foundation for future career development.

Faculty and students in professional preparation programs in the helping professions consider internships, practicums, and field placements among the most influential experiences of their careers (Chiaferi & Griffin, 1997; Cottrell & Wagner, 1990; Jackson, 1997; Royse, Dhooper & Rompf, 1996; Simon, 1972; Simon, 1989; Stanton & Ali, 1994; Stanziani, 1993; Suelzle, 1981). Most students view the internship as a chance to apply theory to practice as well as a chance to grow personally and professionally. Many students do not recognize the problems associated with the

fieldwork experience (Baird, 1999; Tryon, 1996). A common challenge that has been reported in the literature by Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993) is the gulf between theory and practice, also referred to as the bridge between knowledge and practice.

In order to bridge the gap between the academic world and the "real world," a framework can be used to guide students through the challenges of the internship experience. An example of this framework known as the Stages of Internship (Sweitzer & King, 1994) enables students and faculty to prepare for the positive and negative changes experienced during the internship. Because the internship experience involves a constant process of self-exploration and change, this framework can be used by faculty and student preceptors to recognize the predictable stages of change occurring during this experience.

The Stages of Internship has been used as a tool to prepare human service professionals for the rigors of the internship experience in counseling and social work. Because this framework has been used successfully for a number of years in the human service professions, it was adapted to fit the needs of the internship experience in the undergraduate health education program at West Chester University.

The Stages of Internship

According to the Stages of Internship (Sweitzer & King, 1999) there are five predictable stages of an internship: anticipation, disillusionment, confrontation, competence, and culmination. These stages occur in an expected order with their own set of challenges and opportunities. For each stage there are common concerns/issues found throughout the internship experience. If these concerns/issues are unresolved students can become fixed in the stage, which can ultimately lead to student failure. If tasks are successfully completed, students transition smoothly through each stage and reach the final stage of competence. The following stages are the framework for the Stages of Internship (Sweitzer & King, 1999):

Stage 1 - Anticipation

This stage explores typical fears and anxieties associated with the new internship experience. Student uncertainties are the predominant feature of this stage. To demonstrate competence during this stage students have to develop realistic expectations for the internship as well as develop good starting relationships with supervisors, coworkers, and clients.

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Stage 2 – Disillusionment

Disillusionment is the main theme associated with this stage. Students often find themselves questioning their relationships with clients, their supervisors and coworkers. The reality of the experience often does not meet students' expectations and they find themselves dealing with the gap between anticipation and reality. Examples of this stage include students' disappointment along with frustration with their ability to manage assigned tasks at this point in the internship process. This stage can be a challenge as students may develop either positive or negative reaction styles. Examples of positive resolutions would be the student's ability to effectively communicate, manage time, and deal with conflict. Students may fall into negative coping behaviors such as poor communication skills, constant complaining, and inability to complete assignments.

Stage 3 – Confrontation

The confrontation stage focuses on problem resolution. Interpersonal and intrapersonal issues may arise during this stage and need to be addressed by interns, supervisors, and coworkers. Examples of these issues are students' inability to communicate effectively with supervisors and coworkers, along with balancing work responsibilities with personal life issues. Students need the skills to problem-solve issues related to work and life responsibilities to be able to move through this stage.

Stage 4 – Competence

Successfully completing this stage enables students to demonstrate the skills and knowledge needed for an entry-level health educator. Students develop a sense of confidence as emerging professionals. Examples of this stage are students' successful completion of assigned projects, receiving positive evaluations from supervisors, and beginning to perceive themselves as professional health educators. Students demonstrate effectiveness during this stage by taking pride in their accomplishments and recognizing sources of job satisfaction.

Stage 5 – Culmination

At this point in the stage development students bring closure to the internship experience and begin establishing goals for entry into the professional world. Examples of this stage are students' sense of overall accomplishment and readiness to move into their first career position while acknowledging the value of the internship experience in preparing them for their next step. The culmination stage is the final step for students and they need to be able to find satisfying ways to bring closure to the experience along with developing networking contacts and beginning the job search process.

The Health Education Internship Experience

The internship in the Department of Health at West Chester University is the capstone experience for the

Bachelor of Science in Public Health/Health Promotion program. It occurs in the final semester of the senior year and is a 600-hour, 15-week assignment. Students receive extensive professional preparation through a number of health education courses along with career advising before placement in the internship. Once the internship is selected, seniors are placed with an appropriate site supervisor at a health department, health agency, or industry for a full semester. During the internship experience, students are required to complete a major project that involves planning, implementing and evaluating health education programs. Students are required to maintain a daily log of activities, attend fieldwork seminars, maintain a file of work accomplished, and follow all procedures and policies found in the internship manual.

Preparing Students to Manage the Stages of Change in a Health Education Internship

The internship is designed to help students apply, while working in a health related setting, the knowledge and skills developed during the theoretical aspects of the health education academic curriculum. Our faculty recognized the need to prepare the students for the changes they would be experiencing during the internship process. The framework that is currently used in this health education internship program to help students with the change process is the Stages of Internship (Sweitzer & King, 1999). This framework focuses on student empowerment because the internship experience involves a constant process of self-exploration and self-understanding. Kolb (1984) describes this learning process as reflective dialogue that must be organized in a way that encourages self-reflection and discussion. Students in this internship program participate in reflective dialogue through: (1) journaling in logs, (2) planned meetings with site supervisors and staff during completion of projects, and (3) planned meetings with faculty supervisors throughout the semester.

After supervising interns for over 12 years, we have encountered a number of common issues that students experience as they move through the internship process (refer to Table 1). Our faculty supervisors realized the need to not only prepare students to perform the skills of entry-level health educators but to work with the deeper issues of emotional challenges presented during the internship. The Stages of Internship helped our faculty understand the challenges that students encounter during the internship process. The faculty began to adapt strategies for student management suggested by Sweitzer and King (1999) and selected the most appropriate methods that would best help students manage these changes (refer to Tables 1 and 2).

There are specific management strategies that relate to each stage of change (refer to Table 2) and to prepare students for the transitions, the faculty and site supervisors present the Stages of Internship to senior students during an internship orientation program. During the orientation, one class hour is used to present each stage (a total of 5 hours).

Table 1

Stage Theory of Internship: Student Questions, Concerns and Student Centered Strategies for Management

| Stages of Change | Common Student Questions and Concerns | Strategies for Students to Manage the Stages of Change |
|--|--|--|
| Anticipation "What if?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What if I am not prepared? * What if the supervisor and coworkers do not accept me? * What if I make mistakes? * How can I manage the multiple responsibilities? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Refer to job/project description that provides descriptions with clear goals and objectives and time frames. * Arrange for project meetings with supervisors/coworkers. * Admit when mistakes occur and work on a solution. * Work on time management skills with appropriate task time limits. |
| Disillusionment "What is wrong?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Why is this internship not what I expected? * Why can't I talk with my supervisor at any time? * Why does it take so long to get a project done? * What can I do if I don't agree with my supervisor and coworkers? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Assess the work environment and negotiate realistic goals and objectives. * Realize time is valuable and the role of planned meetings for communication. * Understand the organizational structure and protocol for project completion. * Learn to manage conflict by discussing the problem with supervisors/coworkers. |
| Confrontation "What is the problem and the solution?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What is the problem? * What is it that I need to change? * What are the barriers to change? * What are the causes of the problem? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Identify the problem. * Listen to supervisors when offered constructive criticism and feedback for improvement. * List barriers that are blocking change and identify methods to reduce the barriers. * List factors that contribute to the problem and brainstorm solutions. |
| Competence "What is success?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * What skills have I mastered? * How do I define job success and satisfaction? * How do I know if I am considered a professional by supervisors/coworkers? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * List skills (i.e., program planning, evaluation) and match to entry-level competencies for the health educator. * List accomplishments and ask for exit interview with appropriate evaluation from supervisor. * Request a letter of reference from the supervisor. |
| Culmination "What is next?" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Am I ready for the world of work? * How do I say goodbye to my supervisor and coworkers? * Will I get a job? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Prepare resume based on internship experience. * Arrange to meet with supervisors and coworkers to thank them for their help in your growth and development. Maintain professional contacts. * Begin the job search process; network with supervisors/coworkers and faculty supervisors. * Update resume, prepare cover letters, and continue to network. |

During that time, each stage is discussed along with common student reactions that can either prevent or promote movement to the next stage. After student reactions are presented very specific strategies are offered to students to help them understand how they can be proactive during the internship process and begin to work on issues/problems

and bring them to a successful resolution. During this orientation, faculty and site supervisors are able to share their personal experiences as they have observed students move through the change process. Students are presented with faculty and site supervisors' techniques/strategies for successfully moving to the competence stage. Students are

Table 2

Stage Theory of Internship: Student Reactions and Faculty/Supervisor Management Strategies

| Stages of Change | Common Student Reactions During the Stage of Change | Faculty/Supervisor Management Strategies |
|------------------|---|--|
| Anticipation | <u>Reactions that Prevent/Delay Stage Transition</u> * Fear, anxiety and uncertainty <u>Reactions that Promote Stage Transition</u> * Excitement and enthusiasm | * Reduce anxiety and uncertainty by providing students with appropriate job/project descriptions and open up discussion about issues related to the project. * Assure students that they have been well trained to begin their work as entry-level health educators under the direction of competent supervisors. * Encourage student enthusiasm and help them channel their excitement into a productive work experience. |
| Disillusionment | <u>Reactions that Prevent/Delay Stage Transition</u> * Frustration, anger, complaining, missing time or arriving late for internship assignments <u>Reactions that Promote Stage Transition</u> * Successfully examining the issues of anger and frustration and sharing these feelings with faculty or internship supervisors | * Allow students to keep a journal/log that actually reflects events with actions, thoughts, and feelings. * Faculty or internship supervisors meet with students to review the journal/log entries and provide constructive guidelines for reducing the negative reactions. |
| Confrontation | <u>Reactions that Prevent/Delay Stage Transition</u> * Self blame for problems * Failure to discuss problems/issues with faculty/internship supervisors <u>Reactions that Promote Stage Transition</u> * Face the issues and problems and work on solutions | * Help students develop effective problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. (McClam & Woodside, 1994) * Provide students with the skills needed to communicate with faculty/supervisors and coworkers. |
| Competence | <u>Reactions that Prevent/Delay Stage Transition</u> * Failure to move through previous stages and competence is not attained <u>Reactions that Promote Stage Transition</u> * Successful completion and resolution of previous stages and ready for future career development | * If student failure occurs determine the reasons for poor performance through systematic and documented evaluation procedures. Provide students with documented reasons for poor performance. * Reinforce success through formal evaluations, recognition of student performance at the internship site. |
| Culmination | <u>Successful Completion of Stages</u> * The successful culmination of the internship experience results in the student completing all assigned tasks at the level that is needed for the entry-level health educator | * Faculty/internship supervisors become the advocates for students as they begin their new careers. * Encourage students to network and maintain professional contacts. |

encouraged to develop their own strategies for management and to discuss their concerns as they begin to encounter the different issues that will lead to either professional growth or failure (examples of orientation lecture/discussion topics and student activities are presented in Table 3).

Determining Student Movement Through the Stages

The skills and competencies needed to successfully manage each internship stage are important for measuring student success. For example, during the Anticipation Stage

Table 3

Stages of Internship: Student Orientation and Preparation

| Stages of Change | Lecture/Discussion Topics | Activities to Prepare Students for Internship Stages |
|------------------|--|--|
| Anticipation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Being Prepared for the Internship * Reducing Stress and Anxiety * Getting to Know the Internship Site | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students Prepare an Entry Level Health Educator's Skill Inventory (concepts, theories, and skills acquired during their professional preparation). * Students practice stress management techniques that can be used during this stage. * Students prepare a one-page paper about the internship site that includes rules, policies, roles, communication patterns, and values and philosophy of the internship site. |
| Disillusionment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Understanding the Difference Between Anticipation and Reality * Dealing With the "Crisis of Growth" (Sweitzer & King, 1999) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students make a list of internship anticipations and identify feelings of anxiety or excitement. Students share these anticipations in class and note similarities and differences. * Students identify the potential problems and opportunities that can occur during the time of experiential learning and present methods to deal with the positive and negative aspects of growth. |
| Confrontation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Acknowledging Problems * Seeking Appropriate Support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Students practice problem-solving techniques using case studies that focus on common problems encountered during the internship experience. * "Talk to Your Supervisors." In this activity students participate in role playing exercises that are designed to help student communicate with faculty and site supervisors. |
| Competence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Seeing Yourself as an Emerging Professional * Balancing Work Commitment and Life Issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * "The Emerging Professional." In this activity students define their current definition of a professional. Students then review case studies to identify professional behaviors and values that are found through the internship experience. * Students are asked to complete an inventory of work-related activities and life issues that may interfere or enhance professional development. Students participate in group problem-solving sessions to determine methods for achieving balance between work responsibilities and life issues. |
| Culmination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Taking Pride in Accomplishments * Ending the Internship and Moving Forward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * "Lessons Learned." In this activity students review case studies and identify the accomplishments that led to the successful completion of the internship. * Students create thank you letters for site supervisors and coworkers. These letters need to include how the internship helped the student gain the skills needed to work as a new health education professional. |

students need to reduce their anxiety levels by being prepared for their internship through appropriate research on the internship site and analyzing their current skill level. With the next stage, Disillusionment, students are expected to experience the differences between anticipation and reality of the internship experience. Students should be able to manage this stage by facing the realities of the internship. A review of internship goals and expectations can help students understand that the Disillusionment stage can be a crisis of growth and a time of risk and opportunity (Sweitzer & King, 1999). To successfully complete the next stage, Confrontation, students should be able to demonstrate problem-solving skills and effective communication patterns with supervisors and coworkers. Effective support systems established during the stage will help students work through difficult periods during the internship experience. When students reach the stage of Competence they are beginning to see themselves as professionals. The competencies demonstrated during this stage include students' ability to recognize their level of professional growth and development along with the ability to balance work commitments with their personal life. Finally, successful completion of the Stages of Internship is Culmination. Student competencies at this stage are the ability to demonstrate the skills needed to perform as an entry-level health educator and to be able to move into the world or work as a new professional. The most important result of the Stages of Internship is having students become reflective learners and problem-solvers as they begin their professional career.

One example of how students can become reflective learners and begin to recognize the stages of change is through maintaining weekly logs. Students are required to prepare logs that account for their actual work experiences for each week during the internship experience. An important part of the logs are weekly insights where students report their issues, concerns along with failures and successes that occurred during that week. Students are asked to review these weekly insights to see if they can begin to identify the stages of change that were presented to them during the internship orientation program. Within each weekly insight students are asked to determine which stage they are in along with methods that are being used to manage that stage. Since a faculty supervisor only sees logs, this supervisor can also begin identifying problems and issues that students are encountering during their workweek. If faculty begin to see that there is a consistent pattern of negative reactions, they meet with the student to begin the process of problem resolution. Faculty want to see that students are solving problems and acting in a proactive manner in each weekly insight which indicates students are making successful transitions as they move through their internship.

Another example to identify student change is through the evaluation process. During this time site supervisors are responsible for reporting on student growth and development. Faculty supervisors can identify stage change through the evaluation process and can use the site evaluations for identifying problems, concerns, along with

student successes. Weak areas that are described in an evaluation can be linked to specific stage issues and faculty supervisors can begin working with both student and site supervisors for improvement.

There are many other ways to determine student movement through these stages such as meetings, review of project materials, and finally successful completion of the internship that results in students completing assigned tasks as an entry-level health educator. Each internship program can adapt a number of methods from the Stages of Internship to determine stage movement.

Implications for Health Educators

Health education and health promotion as defined by the Joint Committee on Health Education and Promotion Terminology (2000) focuses on the importance of education as a key responsibility for the profession. The seven entry-level competencies for the health educator are clearly delineated in *A Competency Based-Framework for Professional Development of Certified Health Education Specialists* (1996). To prepare students to provide health education based on the entry-level competencies, the internship is certainly the open door for the new career professional as the internship experience enables them to master many of the competencies found in the *Framework*. It is important to note, however, that professional development is more than an intellectual experience. Students need to understand that this is a human experience with emotional overtones (Sweitzer & King, 1999). They need to understand that to move from student status to professional requires the ability to understand and appreciate the complexities of the human experience and how that can impact on their ability to work. To help students understand these complexities, preparation through the Stages of Internship can help students move beyond skill acquisition to another level of professional development that focuses on self-reflection, empowerment, and problem-solving capabilities.

Faculty play an important role in helping students successfully move through the stages of internship. Faculty should become familiar with the stages of change in professional development to enable students to cope with the wide variety of intellectual and emotional experiences during the internship. Faculty that utilize the Stages of Internship can help students transition from interns to health education professionals.

Conclusion

Professional preparation programs such as the health education internship program at West Chester University can enhance the internship experience through utilizing the Stages of Internship. Furthermore, health education faculty have a responsibility to prepare students to be able to process and reflect upon the internship experience in a way that promotes a holistic approach to professional development.

This approach includes not only skill acquisition but the broader scope of human interactions as they impact on the work environment.

The major focus of the Stages of Internship is to enable students to become reflective practitioners who are proactive, competent, problem-solvers. It is important to remember that students understand that the stages of an internship will be revisited throughout their lifetime with new jobs and experiences. The lessons learned during the internship can serve as a foundation for future professional growth and development. The Stages of Internship can be a useful tool to improve students' self understanding through experiential learning, and if practiced over time, students can move through future stages of change with more confidence and self assurance (Sweitzer & King, 1999).

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